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SALAMAN

Modern masters of etching -

J. H. Forain.

WITHDRAWN

Wimbledon School of Art



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MODERN MASTERS OF ETCHING
J. L. FORAIN

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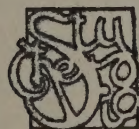
MODERN MASTERS OF ETCHING

J. L. FORAIN

INTRODUCTION BY

MALCOLM C.

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1925

THE STUDIO

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It was not until 1908 that Jean Louis Forain, then fifty-six years of age, one of the most distinguished artists in France and a draughtsman of marvelous power and intuition, gave any sign of that expressive mastery with etching-needle and mordant which within the next four years was to win him recognition from the connoisseurs as one of the master-etchers of all time. True, he had begun to etch as far back as 1873, and between that date and 1886 he had wrought the twenty-eight plates recorded in the first volume of M. Marcel Guérin's Catalogue, but these have little interest and no distinction as etchings, while in their manner and content they merely suggest echoes of the lively illustrations he was pouring out upon the Paris press. He dropped etching for twenty-two years, took up lithography with enthusiasm and produced masterpieces upon the stone, while all the time, as a prolific illustrator of extraordinary significance, he was establishing a wide popularity by the vividness and mordant effect of the graphic power and pictorial wit with which he satirised the bourgeois life of Paris in its sordidly gay, vulgar and dissolute phases. The drawings culled from the newspapers were republished in volumes, the first, I think, being *La Comédie Parisienne* of 1892, which happens to be on my table at this moment, and looking at haphazard through this, or any of the others, one may

find little masterpieces of draughtsmanship as complete in pictorial suggestion and acute characterisation as a drawing by Charles Keene. "Decidedly the most interesting newspaper illustrator of his whole generation, the one whose ephemeral art most closely approaches grand painting"; so that excellent critic M. Camille Mauclair wrote of Forain some twenty-five years ago, classing him with the Impressionists and tracing the influence of Degas. The astonishing power, the nervous character, the science of Forain's drawing, every stroke a revelation, the satirical import of his illustrations and cartoons, the significance and interest of his paintings, of all these M. Mauclair spoke, but he made no mention of Forain ever having been an etcher, doubtless regarding those early plates as artistically negligible. In only one of these, *La Traite des blanches*, do I find the linear treatment and compassionate significance suggesting any affinity with the later etchings of Forain, now the acknowledged master of a bitten line and expressive style innately vital and entirely his own; but, since M. Guérin tells us that, although this plate was drawn on the copper in 1886, it was not etched till 1909, one may suppose that the master, in bringing it to the printing stage after that long lapse of years, informed it with distinction from his increased knowledge and command of the etcher's art.

We may now forget for a while the caustic

cartoonist, the witty graphic commentator who could always be reckoned on to keep Paris laughing, and as we surrender ourselves to the spell of Forain, the master-etcher, we find a great expressive artist in the full maturity of his powers, and a man rich in a compassionate humanity. The etcher's idiom with its suggestive reticence he calls to his expression when he is deeply moved by some poignant episode of contemporary life or scriptural story, employing it with an accent unmistakably personal, that accent of emotion inherent in the line responsive to his conception. I do not remember, however, that the absolute individuality of the master's line caused me, on my first acquaintance with it, any such shock of strangeness or surprise as Forain's most enthusiastic advocate in this country, Mr. Campbell Dodgson, himself seemingly experienced, for it was the completeness of the line's expressive functioning and its sensitive variability that impressed me rather than any novelty in its appearance. Yet this line could not be more appositely described than it has been by Mr. Dodgson, who in his private capacity as critic and collector, and with his official authority as Keeper of Prints at the British Museum, never ceases to proclaim his faith in Forain's greatness as etcher. "The French master," he says, "uses a pure, sharp line, keen and cleanly bitten, which can give the finest possible contour when it suits his purpose, but is often so complicated by twists and

zigzags, crossings and tangles, that it seems almost a miracle that any recognisable form should emerge out of apparent chaos. But it does. These networks and zigzags are not so casual as the novice may think them. They are the work of a master hand, very sure of the effect it intends to produce, however unusual or even eccentric we may think the means employed. They somehow produce the effect of mass, soundness and solidity where a certain amount of shading is required, while in very lightly sketched subjects such as *Femme nue, assise sur son lit, de face*, or *Le Repos du Modèle* [PLATE V], the artist relies much more upon contour, and the modelling is obtained by means which appears almost miraculous, the white spaces producing their full effect by being exactly proportioned to the confining lines." This is admirably put, but I would add to the subjects cited by Mr. Dodgson two supreme examples of Forain's complete fulfilment of his conception with a sketchy handling of line and space. These are the infinitely pathetic *L'Imploration devant la Grotte* [PLATE X], and the third and final plate of the *Pietà*. In that wonderful etching, which is not among our illustrations only because I had already selected it to represent Forain's genius in THE CHARM OF THE ETCHER'S ART, all the poignant humanity of the Calvary sequel seems to be concentrated in the inspired lines of the etcher, which so simply yet so movingly depict the tender solicitude of the grief-

stricken Mother and Mary Magdalene for the dead Christ. Every fluent stroke of the etcher's needle here is the imaginative utterance of a great artist moved in the very deeps of his nature, and I would go so far as to say that even Rembrandt, in his *Christ carried to the Tomb*, does not suggest the grievous pity of the event more poignantly than does this *Pietà* of the modern master. And what a marvellously expressive achievement with seemingly a mere scribble of lines is the figure of grief sitting apart from the sacred group!

Whether the subjects of Forain's etchings be suggested by the Gospels or by modern instances of mundane interest, it is always the significance of their essential humanity that stirs his artistic emotion. Looking through these prints, one is led to believe that his copper-plates have been the recipients of some of the most intimate and beautiful confidences of his spirit when he has been moved to compassion by manifestations of the dramatic pathos and irony of human events and circumstances. In the Paris law-courts he has seen many such, and some of his most impressive etchings have resulted, as well as some of his finest lithographs, such as the vivid *Conseil Juridique* and the dramatic *L'Avocat Invectivé*. He was, in fact, induced to resume his etching-needle by the scene of a man's despair in the dock contrasted with a woman's callousness, and all the story of *Le Désespoir de l'Accusé* is told in the few lightly etched lines of the bowed back and the head buried

in the hands. Nearly all these incidents of the law-courts were etched in the earlier stages of his mature period, and in using occasionally soft-ground with or without the accent of the hard-ground line Forain would seem to have been aiming at the rich tonal effects of his lithographs. For example, the final state of the second plate of *Témoins à l'Audience*, in which, with emphasis obtained by massing thick black soft-ground strokes where the form is indicated by fine hard lines, the interest is focussed on the worn ugly face of the woman with the hideous baby in her lap who has replaced the attractive young woman of the first version with more pathetic significance. Yet this did not satisfy the artist; so he etched a further version of the subject in soft-ground on zinc, and suggested the tedious, nervous experience of the waiting witness in an ordinary young woman sitting with two small weary children and looking round apprehensively at the curious obtrusive advocates behind her.

This habit of making entirely fresh versions of a subject, not merely differences of state, with occasionally changes of medium, until his artistic conscience is satisfied with his own conception and the expressive communication of it, is characteristic of the master. Sometimes he will essay as many as five versions before he feels he has said what he wanted to say in the best possible way; for instance, *Le Retour de l'Enfant Prodigue* and *C'est fini!* The parable of the

Prodigal Son appeals to Forain with the perennial beauty of its universal humanity, and characteristically his pictorial interpretation presents a father and son of to-day, or any day, in a beautifully pathetic act of reconciliation through abject contrition and forgiving love. But the pity and beauty of his conception did not reach their consummate expression till he had etched the subject four times, and even after the exquisite version reproduced here [PLATE I] the still unsatisfied artist essayed yet another, *Le Retour de l'Enfant Prodigue (au clocher)*. This I find inexplicable, since the poignant moment of the parable had inspired a masterpiece in the fourth plate, complete in its second state. The long white road with the distant homestead, the poor tattered prodigal on his knees in misery of heart, his hat and staff flung down behind him, "but when he was yet a great way off his father saw him and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." To Forain's etching in its great simplicity of expression one might apply Dean Farrar's description of the parable itself: "every line, every touch of the picture is full of beautiful significance."

How wide-reaching are Forain's human sympathies we may read in *Après la Saisie* [PLATE II], just a poverty-stricken family turned out of such home as they had, the woman striding along with her two little children, the man slouching after them; a bleak scene, but with pity eloquent in the

very simplicity of the etcher's expression. As Charles Lamb said of Hogarth's engravings, "other pictures we look at, his prints we *read*," so might we say of Forain's etchings, his prints we *feel*, and wonder about, so emotionally informed are they with the essential character of their subjects. What inexpressible compassion, for instance, the artist excites as he shows us, in the two versions of *Fille-mère*, the lonely misery of the unfortunate girl in the dock, with the three lawyers trying to look as unconcerned as if it were an everyday scene, though one of them, in the first plate, seems to be looking back searchingly into his own conscience. Sympathy of a less poignant kind is evoked by *La Sortie de l'Audience* [PLATE III]. Something is here for tears, we feel, but know not exactly what. By her dejected aspect as she passes through the court toward the door with the two children, all unaware of life's entanglements, and by the conscious attitudes of the lawyers, we are sure that this lady has lost her suit, whatever it was. She looks too old to be the children's mother—perhaps her daughter was that—yet they would seem to be her care, and evidently it is compromised by the law's adverse judgment. One cannot help feeling sorry; but when Forain put his second thoughts sketchily on to another plate, he made the woman young and attractive and obviously the widowed mother of the orphans, yet somehow the situation with these retrieving possibilities seems less

moving. Far more so is that in *Le Prévenu et l'Enfant*, perhaps the most appealing of all this law-court series (See THE CHARM OF THE ETCHER'S ART, Part III), where the young wife of the prisoner in the dock, to give him impulsively a moment's pitiful comfort, holds up her chubby child to recognise its accused father. The sweet humanity of this is pictorially emphasised by the listless look of the old advocate with his brief on his knees, not too old to recognise the touch of nature. In *La Lecture du Dossier* the etcher has allowed himself the indulgence of irony in the flirtatious discussion of some provocative point in the *dossier* between the leering advocate and a young woman of very coming-on disposition—possibly the principal witness. In *L'Avocat parlant au Prévenu* [PLATE IV], the dry-point version, we feel that the fluffy-headed young woman—wife perhaps—bending so apprehensively over her sleeping child, has had a good deal to put up with from the callous prisoner and his cruel-looking hands, while the keen, contemptuous expression on that practised counsel's face promises no sympathetic advocacy. It is his job to defend the cunning brute; that is the way he gets an honest living, but he knows instinctively, and from long experience of the kind, that the man has done whatever he may be charged with.

When Whistler put his *Model Resting* on to the copper, he was concerned only to present a

graceful winsome aspect of the girl as she stood with wistful look drawing her wrap cosily around her; but *Model about to rest*, or *Model posing after-time*, would perhaps have more exactly described Whistler's charming plate—dry-point, if I remember rightly. With Forain's *Le Repos du Modèle* [PLATE V], however, there is no such ambiguity; the model is unmistakably taking her ease in her own nonchalant way, smoking her cigarette, and leaning her naked arm on the shoulder of the elderly, slippered artist, as she looks on with perfunctory interest while he, seizing the opportunity of his model's need for rest, absorbs himself in a critical examination of his work, and almost ignores her. How suggestively psychological the master is in these few vivid lines instinct with the pictorial conception! The sketchiness of *A la Table de Jeu* [PLATE VI] suggests an impromptu, yet here are the gamblers individualised, and here is the collective mind of the group sordidly concentrated on the exciting moment of play. What more need we ask of the etcher's pregnant lines? But for sheer mastery of human expression in a few scratched lines on copper, that wonderfully emotional dry-point *C'est fini!* has never, I think, been excelled if it has ever been equalled, and it would certainly have been reproduced here had I known where to find available one of the extremely rare fine proofs. A man and a woman are seated at a table in a Paris café. They have obviously been lovers, but

in his bowed head and arms stretched out with pleading hands, and in her tear-suffused eyes and the handkerchief held over her mouth to stifle the sobs we can almost hear, we read that this is to be their last meeting. He pleads, perhaps, that the fates are against them, that their parting is inevitable—he must marry money. Anyhow, one guesses that the severing blow has come, however reluctantly, from the man, and for her, loving, it means a world of sad regret—perhaps a half-world. In the delicately expressive reticence of *C'est fini!* the very genius of the etcher's art is eloquent.

Among the etchings in which Forain has illustrated incidents in the life of Christ are some of his greatest things, most vividly imagined, and conceived with absolute originality in the modern spirit that recognises the perennial actuality of the Gospel Story in its human import. It is significant of the master's wide-reaching sympathies that between two plates so sordid in subject as *A la Table de Jeu* and *En Cabinet Particulier*—this last not without its suggestion of a pitiful tolerance—he should have produced that plate of sweetly tender feeling, *La Madone et les Enfants*, in which the infant Christ on his mother's knee is reaching out with affectionate appeal to a group of children, such as one might see any day in any street, who respond with but gentle curiosity. In like manner he turned directly from the studio camaraderie of artist and model to the tremendous

tragedy of Calvary. But he did not attempt to picture the Crucifixion. In *Le Calvaire* he tells the story with beautiful reticence, merely showing us a group of sorrowful men—workmen some of them—in modern garments, one carrying an upright ladder, all standing in attitudes of reverential pity, for they are watching the bowed figure of the broken-hearted Mother being led slowly away by the devoted Mary Magdalene and John the Apostle. There are three wonderful plates, however, in which Forain vivifies with imaginative art of the highest order the incidents of Christ's tribulation immediately before the Crucifixion. In *Le Christ dépouillé de ses Vêtements* [PLATE VII] the figure of the Saviour, superbly plastic in the drawing, expresses all the shameful suffering and humiliation, while the surrounding figures are so sketched in as to suggest the atmosphere of insult and contempt, and the black, lowering cloud seems ominous of dreadful happenings to come. *Le Christ aux Outrages* is, as Mr. Campbell Dodgson has truly said, "one of the most tragic of Forain's inventions," but the tragedy becomes more poignantly expressive, I think, in the second state, with the dry-point burr on Christ's head harmoniously modified, so that we see the contrast of a more sublime resignation as the jeering, insulting faces of the cruel mockers are emphasised. *Le Christ portant sa Croix* [PLATE IX] is a masterpiece of suggestively vital composition, in which the

wonderfully vivid drawing carries the eye along with the central figure as he strides with his awful burden past the crowd, as unheeding of the sorrowful ones and the jeering as of the executioners at his heels. In etching these New Testament subjects Forain, of course, challenges comparison with Rembrandt, and bears it nobly. Who shall turn from Rembrandt's two plates of *Christ at Emmaus* to Forain's *La Fraction du Pain* [PLATE VIII] and find less spiritually moving, less impressively beautiful than the immortal Dutch master's, the modern French master's representation of the two disciples suddenly recognising the resurrected Christ as He blesses and breaks the bread at their meal, even though the artist has given the sacred figure no conventional glory of light about his head? The Emmaus episode has inspired Forain to etch several plates, of which three, besides *La Fraction du Pain*, are particularly remarkable in their novelty of interpretation. These are the third version of *La Rencontre sous la Voûte*, where the disciples might be two French *bourgeois* of to-day; *Avant le Repas à Emmaus*, where the old innkeeper laying the cloth for the meal of the strangely-met travellers suggests a very modern significance for this scriptural episode; and the hauntingly mysterious *Après l'Apparition*, with the chair empty where Christ was sitting a moment ago, and the two amazed disciples crouching together at the opposite corner of the table and staring wonder-

bound into space where they believe their vanished Lord must be—one of the great achievements of the art.

Religious emotion was perhaps the most potent artistic inspiration during Forain's prolific period of etching, and our illustrations include the three, as I believe, most beautifully expressive plates of the Lourdes series, representing the pilgrims to the famous sacred Grotto, the "sick, blind, halt, withered," and pathetic manifestations of their faith in the healing powers of the miraculous spring. *L'Imploration devant la Grotte* [PLATE X]; here are a man and wife on their knees, praying out of the depths of their love and faith for a miracle to heal their crippled child whom the father holds out in his arms. The little crutch on the ground tells the pitiful tale of helplessness, and the rapt expressions of the supplicants indicate how high their hopes are reaching beyond the pain they daily suffer for their child's pain. As I look at this etching, with all the human emotion of the subject implicit in its essential simplicity, the wise saying of Ingres comes to my mind: "The simpler your lines and forms are the stronger and more beautiful they will be." Could anything be simpler than this etching? The very wonder in it is beautiful. *La Miraculée* [PLATE XI] shows us a woman who, after crippled years perhaps, has suddenly in the fervour of her faith lifted herself from her stretcher, flung away her crutch, and, standing erect, proclaims the miracle

has happened and she is whole again. The other invalid pilgrims look on curiously, perhaps sceptically, perhaps jealously, one or two sympathetically, while a crowd of pilgrims passes by in procession taking no notice; but the woman herself is spiritually satisfied with the moment, though perhaps that crutch may come in useful again, or perhaps it had long ceased to be really necessary. The etcher of that wonderful *Pietà*, of which I have already spoken, could hardly have failed to give an impressive rendering of *La Communion des Malades* [PLATE XII]. It is a pathetic scene, this row of helpless sufferers, each, however strong in faith, needing the bodily support of

the Sister of Mercy as the priest goes along the row administering the Host in turn; and with such simplicity of pictorial treatment how remarkably comprehensive the composition! The only other plates of the Lourdes series that I have seen are *La Paralytique* and *Devant la Piscine*, both penetrated, no less than the others, with the artist's pity and religious sympathy, combined with the interest of fresh pictorial motive. Thirteen years have passed since these etchings were done, and we who revere the genius of Forain wait hopefully for a sign that the master has again taken up his etching-needle.

MALCOLM C. SALAMAN.

THE EDITOR DESIRES TO ACKNOWLEDGE
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PREPARATION OF THIS FOLIO BY THE
ARTIST, M. J. L. FORAIN, AND MR. CAMP-
BELL DODGSON, C.B.E., WHO HAVE KINDLY
ALLOWED THE PRINTS TO BE REPRODUCED.

PLATE 1.

“ LE RETOUR DE L'ENFANT PRODIGE ” (ETCHING, 4TH PLATE, 2ND STATE, 11 × 17 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE II.

"APRÈS LA SAISIE" (ETCHING, 13 × 11 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE III.

" LA SORTIE DE L'AUDIENCE " (ETCHING, 2ND PLATE, 13 × 11 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE IV.

" L'AVOCAT PARLANT AU PREVENU " (ETCHING, 1ST PLATE, 2ND STATE, 9 × 11 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE V.

“ LE REPOS DU MODÈLE ” (ETCHING, 2ND PLATE, 1ST STATE, 8 × 11 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.

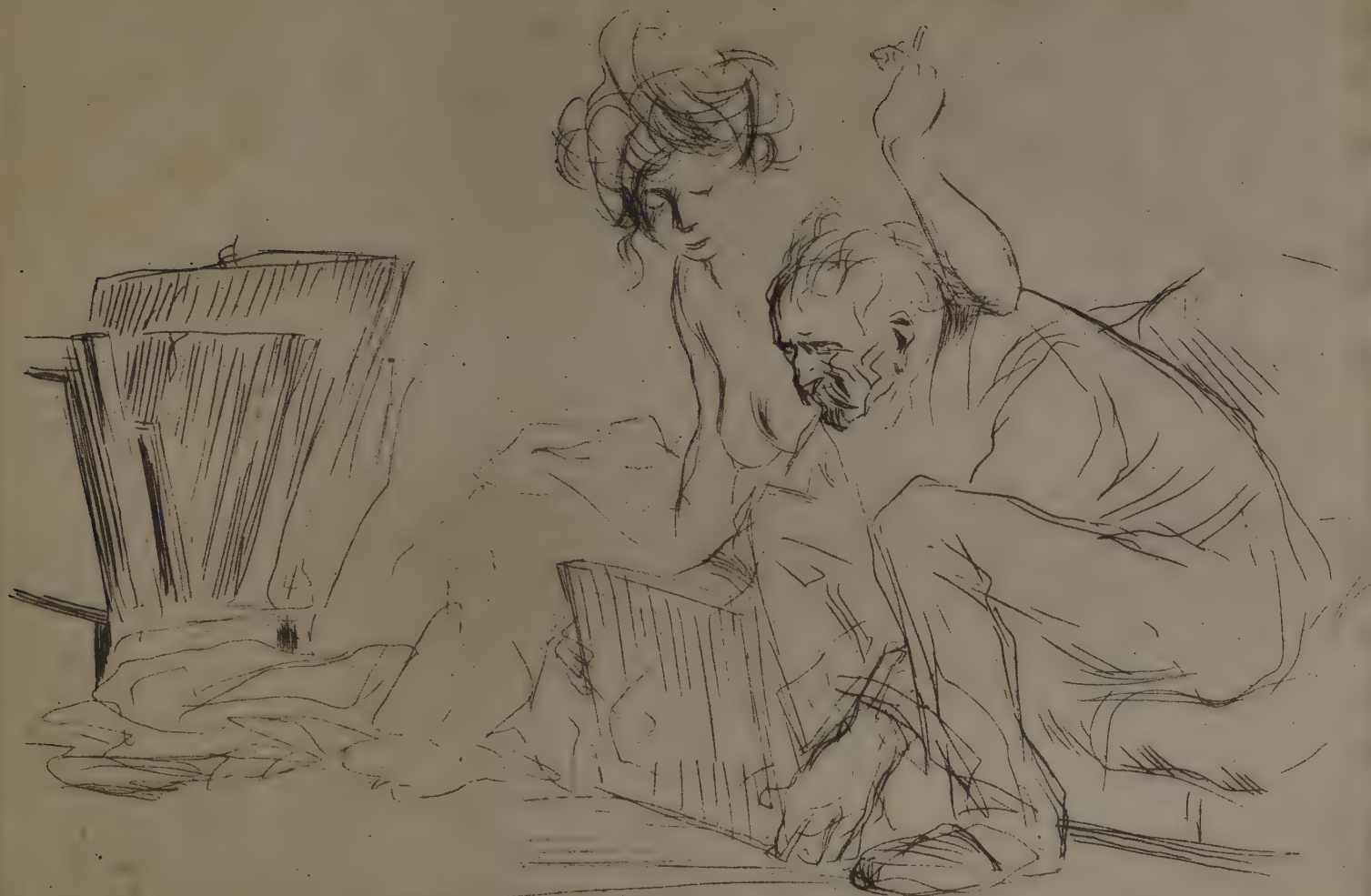


PLATE VI.

" A LA TABLE DE JEU " (ETCHING, 2ND PLATE, 1ST STATE, 8 × 11 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE VII.

"LE CHRIST DEPOUILLÉ DE SES VÊTEMENTS" (ETCHING, 4TH STATE, 9 × 11 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE VIII.

“ LA FRACTION DU PAIN ” (ETCHING, 2ND PLATE, 2ND STATE, 11 × 10 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE IX.

“ LE CHRIST PORTANT SA CROIX ” (ETCHING, 4TH PLATE, 2ND STATE, 11 × 15 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE X.

“ L'IMPLORATION DEVANT LA GROTTÉ ” (ETCHING, 1ST STATE, 10 × 7 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE XI.

"LA MIRACULÉE" (ETCHING, 1ST PLATE, 11 × 13 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.



PLATE XII.

“ LA COMMUNION DES MALADES ” (ETCHING, 1ST STATE, 11 × 13 INCHES.)

From a proof in the possession of Campbell Dodgson, Esq., C.B.E.





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